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FREDERICK MARIO FALES & GIULIA FRANCESCA GRASSI



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EGYPTIAN TERMS USED TO INDICATE THE ACT OF READING: AN INVESTIGATION ABOUT THE ACT OF READING IN THE EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

Federico Contardi

In our society, the act of reading is understood as an experience practised individually and silently. Those cases in which reading is supported by the voice are limited. When a text is difficult to decipher, reading aloud facilitates decoding of signs and clarification of the script; secondly, we may read a lecture aloud to an audience; thirdly, a text is read aloud when part of a liturgy in a religious service.

By contrast, in ancient Egypt reading was essentially an audio experience; in other words, not only the eyes but the mouth, too, was employed by the reader.¹

The epithets of two high officials of the Middle Kingdom (Hapidjefa of Asiu² and Amenemhat of Beni Hassan³) include one which expresses their ability to read (orally): *rdi mdw drf* “he who causes that the script speaks”.⁴

It is important to realize that the scarcity and nature of the sources limit our information about reading. Commentaries and manuals detailing the correct manner to read a text, as are known from the classical world, are not preserved from Egypt, nor are there depictions of persons reading, except for limited and repetitive examples.

The more frequent verbs for reading clearly express the use of the voice.

The most common among them is *šdi*, with the determinative Gardiner SL A2,⁵ a squatting man with a hand to his mouth. Its basic meaning is “to draw forth”; metaphorically it was used with the meaning “to read, to recite”, that is, “to draw forth sound (from the text)”. *Šdi* referred to reading texts of all sorts: funerary inscriptions, rituals, spells, wisdom texts, letters, and so on.

In funerary inscriptions, in rituals, and in spells, reading a text out loud had a performative character; the text became active and effective through its recitation.

¹ Recent publications touching on this topic include: Parkinson 2002, 78-81; Morenz 1996, 43-52; Redford 2000, 159-163.

² Sethe 1935, 62 (17).

³ Sethe 1935, 18 (19).

⁴ This epithet was also applied to some gods, among them Thoth. Cf. Leitz 2002, 746.

⁵ Gardiner 1957³.

Funerary offering formulae were *pṛt ḥrw* — invocation-offerings — and appropriate inscriptions, so-called appeals to the living, exhorted visitors to the tomb, or those who might pass, to recite the text, so that the deceased could profit from the offerings.

In a text on an 18th Dynasty stela, the deceased exhorts visitors at the tomb to perform the funerary offering, presuming that some could read the formulae, while the illiterate might listen: “Oh (you), who live on earth, all people, all *wab*-priests (...) who enter this tomb of the necropolis, who love life and hate death (...) You will be buried in your tombs (...) as one who will read these words on this stela, as a scribe (*m šd.ty.fy mdt tn ḥr wḏ pn m sš*), or as one who will hear them (*m sdm.ty.fy st*), if you say: A boon for Intef (...)”.⁶

Obviously such funerary texts were pronounced aloud, and they had an audience as suggested, too, by the text of the stela of Mentu-user from the 12th Dynasty: “Now as for all people who shall hearken to this stela (*ir grt rmt(t) nbt sdm.t(y).sn 'b3 pn*) (...) And as for every scribe who shall read this stela (*ir grt sš nb šd.t(y).f(y) 'b3 pn*) (...)”.⁷

Among the listeners there might be children of literate parentage, who had not yet learned read: “Whoever among you is too young for these words, question your father (*ir nḥn.t(y).f(y) im.tn r mdt tn nm .k it.k*), he will tell you”.⁸

Such a feature of oral reading is emphasized in the biography of Nekhebu through the use of the verb (*ḏd*) for “to read”: “Do you desire that the king favours you and that you be honoured by the great god? Then you shall say 1000 of bread, 1000 of beer for Nekhebu” (*in iw mry.n.tn ḥz tn nsw wnn im3ḥ.tn ḥr ntr '3 ḏd.tn ḥ3 m t ḥ3 m ḥnkt n Nḥbw*)⁹. In the biography of Pepiankh from Meir, the request to speak out loud is expressed even more graphically: “O all people who go north, who come south (*i rmt nb šmw m ḥd iw m ḥnt*) (...) give me bread and beer from what you have, present it with your hands, offer it with your mouth (*dd.tn n.(i) t ḥnkt m ntt m- .tn f33.tn m 'wy.tn wdn.tn m r.tn*)”.¹⁰

The creative effect of the voice is eloquently described in papyrus Chester Beatty IV (*verso* 3,2): “Assuredly profitable in the necropolis is a name in the mouth of mankind” (*smwn rf 3ḥ m ḥrt-ntr rn m r n rmt*).¹¹

A passage in the texts of Dendera Temple characterizes the effectiveness of a speech — in Egyptian *3ḥ r* — when pronounced by the priest in the ritual with the following words: “The *iḥy*-priest, whose mouth is profitable, who recites the ritual book, whose tongue is pleasant pronouncing praises”(w'*b-iḥy 3ḥ r šd ḥbt bnr ns ḥr nis ḥknw*).¹²

Because of the performative character of speech, some magical texts and rituals required the reader to be pure. Spell 64 (columns 27-28) in the Book of Dead of Nu stipulates:¹³ “This spell shall be read, being pure, immaculate, without having eaten goat meat and fish and without having intercourse with women” (*šdd.tw r pn w'b twr nn wnm 'wt mḥyt nn tkn m ḥmwt*). The same is prescribed for performing the Litany of Ra: “As for the one who reads this book, he reads it, being pure” (*ir šdd mḏ3t tn šdd.f s w'b*).¹⁴

In both cases, the use of the adverbial predicate *w'b* (in stative) with the nominal *sdm.f* (*šdd.tw - šdd.f*) emphasizes “purity” grammatically.

⁶ Sethe – Helck 1984, 965 (17)-966 (2).

⁷ Sethe 1928, 80.

⁸ Biography of Henqu: Sethe 1933, 78 (1-2).

⁹ Sethe 1933, 218 (16)-219 (1).

¹⁰ Sethe 1933, 223 (17)-224 (3).

¹¹ Gardiner 1935, I, 39 and II, pl. 19.

¹² Chassinat 1935, 78 (5-6).

¹³ Budge 1899, pl. 26.

¹⁴ Hornung 1975, 264.

In captions to ritual scenes, redundancy frequently stresses the use of the voice: “Reading the ritual book, words to say: I recite the book of overthrowing yours enemies” (*šd(t) ḥbt ḏd mdw nīs.(i) mdʒt n šhr ḥftyw.t*).¹⁵ Here three verbs (*šdi*, *ḏd* and *nīs*) are employed.

Performing ritual texts through the voice is a phenomenon of our contemporary society, too; performing the divine office in the Catholic Church comes to mind as one example. The practice for literary texts differs, since — except for reading in front of an audience — they are performed silently. Silent reading is not only the rule nowadays; it attests the reader’s literacy as well. A person who reads aloud for himself — even if only murmuring — is presumed by those around him to be an individual who needs this aid and therefore is unaccustomed to reading.

Egyptian practice was different; the reading of a literary text — or of a text in general — was normally aloud, even without an audience.

In the Teaching for Merikare¹⁶ is asserted: “Behold, their words endure in writing. Open and read them, so that you emulate the wise (*pgʒ šd.k sn.k r rhw*)”; in the Teaching of Khety¹⁷ we read: “Read at the end of the Kemyt, where you find this sentence” (*šd ir.k m phwy Kmyt gmy.k ts pn im.s*).

The verb *šdi* with the meaning “to recite”, can also be used to express the mnemonical recitation of a written text. This is clearly expressed in the concluding portion of the Teaching for Kagemmi:¹⁸ “they put it on their belly (*i.e.* they learned by heart)¹⁹ and they recited it as what was in writing” (*wn.in.sn ḥr rdt st ḥr ḥwt.sn wn.in.sn ḥr šdt st mī ntt m sš*).

The importance of perfect mnemonical knowledge of a wisdom text was such that in the so-called *Satiric Letter* of the Ramesside Period, a scribe expresses his disappointment at the ignorance of his colleague: “you have come, provided with great secrets and have quoted to me a verse of Hardedef. You do not know whether it is good or bad, which stanza is before it, which after it” (*tw.k ii.ti ḥn.t m štʒw ʒy ḏd.k n.i w’ ts n Ḥr-dd.f bw rh.k nfr [m] r pw bin it ḥwt r ḥʒt.f nīm ḥr sʒ.f*).²⁰

When Late Egyptian became a written language, a new word for reading was introduced, ‘š, which persisted in Demotic. In the form **Ⲡⲱ** (*osh*), it became the only word for reading used in Coptic.²¹ The basic meaning of the verb was “to call”, and, metaphorically, “to read aloud”. Exactly like *šdi*, it was used with reference to all kinds of texts.

In New Kingdom and Late Period texts written in classical Egyptian, ‘š is used as an alternative for the older *šdi*. In the tomb of Kyenbu²² (20th Dynasty), the caption for the scene of the Opening the Mouth ritual enacted on the mummy, reads: “his son, who reads the ritual of Opening the Mouth” (*sʒ.f ʿš wpt-r*).

In Edfu Temple, the performance of the offering ritual for the benefit of the *bʒw ntrw* is expressed as: “The offering formulae are read by a scribe of the god’s book” (*ʿš nʒ rw n wʒh-ih̄t in pʒ sš mdʒt ntr*).²³

In the papyrus of Nesmin, a liturgical text from the 4th century BC intended as a manual for the glorification of the dead at the Festival of the Valley, the gods do the reading: “Thoth reads for you the book of Opening of Mouth, while Horus, thy *sm*-priest, reads for you the magic spells from his writing

¹⁵ Rochemonteix – Chassinat 1892-1985, I 557 (16).

¹⁶ p. Ermitage 1116A, 35-36 (Golénischeff 1913, pl. 9-10).

¹⁷ p. Sallier 2, IV 2-3 (Helck 1970, 22).

¹⁸ p. Prisse 2, 6-7 (Jéquier 1911, pl. 1).

¹⁹ For this interpretation of *wn.in.sn ḥr rdt st ḥr ḥwt.sn* see Roccati 2005, 161-165.

²⁰ p. Anastasi I, 10,9-11,2 (Fischer-Elfert 1992, 95).

²¹ Crum 1939, 534 a.

²² TT 113.

²³ Rochemonteix – Chassinat 1892-1985, V 131 (7-8).

equipment in front of thee” (*š n.k Dḥwty wp-r Hr p3y.k stm šd n.k ḥk3w hrt.f m b3ḥ.k*).²⁴ “To read” is initially expressed by *š*, while *šdi* is used in parallel in the following clause.

The verb *nīs* is another word meaning “to call”, “to summon”, which is sometime used for “to recite”, “to read aloud”.

While *šdi* and *š* could be used for all texts, *nīs* applied specifically to reading as ritual action, excluding the reading of literary or more generally profane texts.

Usually *nīs* occurs in the expressions *nīs ḥknw* (reciting praises) and *nīs dbḥt-ḥtp* (reciting the offering-formula); *nīs s3ḥw* (reciting the glorifications) is uncommon, since *šdi* is preferred in this phrase.

It is not always possible to distinguish between reading (*nīs*) a set text aloud or reciting a text from memory. The seldom occurrence of *nīs* in the appeal to the living, inviting passers-by to recite the formulae written in the tomb — usually formulated through the verb *šdi* — provides certain confirmation for the meaning of reciting a written text, too. In fact, in the tomb of Petosiris we read: “oh (you) prophet, priests of Thoth, Lord of Hermopolis, who will go in this necropolis, who will see this tomb, who will recite the words which are in it” (*i ḥmw-ntr w'bw n Dḥwty nb Ḥmnw 'k.(ty).sn r st3t tn m33.(ty).sn is pn nīs.(ty).sn mdw nty im.f*).²⁵

The usage of *nīs* for “reciting a written text” is limited to ritual texts. In Edfu (II 34,6) the king asserts: “Words to say: I have taken the book, I have recited the glorifications” (*ḏḏ mdw šsp.n.(i) md3t nīs.n.i 3ḥw*). And again in Edfu (I 557,16): “Reading the ritual book, words to say: I recite the book of overthrowing yours enemies” (*šd(t) ḥbt ḏḏ mdw nīs.(i) md3t n šhr ḥftyw.t*).

Reading in the profane sphere — just as in the religious sphere — was accomplished with the help of the vocal organ, as references in literary and school texts confirm.

School texts of the Ramesside period reveal what makes a good scribe. In papyrus Lansing (*recto* 2,9-3,1) we read: “Your heart is understanding, your fingers skilled, your mouth clever at reading” (*wh' ib.k šs3 db'w.k spd r.k šd*).²⁶ In other manuscripts — papyrus Anastasi III (*recto* 3,10-3,11),²⁷ and V (23,3-23,4)²⁸ as well as papyrus Lansing (*recto* 1,4)²⁹ — a teacher urges apprentice scribes to follow his advice: “Write with your hand, read with your mouth” (*sš m ḏrt.k šd m r.k*).

It follows that the use of the mouth for reading was regarded as totally normal. Papyrus Chester Beatty IV (*verso* 3,3)³⁰ celebrates writing as a more reliable medium for perpetuating a person's memory than large monuments in stone: “A man has perished and his corpse is become earth. All his kindred have crumbled to dust. But it is writings which cause him to be remembered in the mouth of the reader (*in sš rdd šḥ3.tw.f m r n dd n r*). More profitable is a book than the house of the builder, than chapels in the West. Better is it than an established castle and than a memorial-stone in a temple”.

Reading was a listening process, always with at least one recipient — the reader himself, and sometimes an audience, too. The reader as the sole listener to his text is well described in papyrus Lansing (*recto* 2,1),³¹ where the teacher recommends that the student: “Spend the whole day writing with your fingers, whilst you read by night” (*wrš sš m db'w.k iw.k šd m grḥ*). In this case, it is clear that the recipient of the text is the reader alone, so well portrayed as a student undertaking his reading in the loneliness of the night.

²⁴ Papyrus B.M. 10209 2, 27 (Haikal 1970, Part one, 34).

²⁵ Lefebvre 1923, II § 102, 75.

²⁶ Gardiner 1937, 101; Caminos 1954, 377.

²⁷ Gardiner 1937, 23-24; Caminos 1954, 83.

²⁸ Caminos 1954, 263.

²⁹ Gardiner 1937, 100; Caminos 1954, 373.

³⁰ Gardiner 1935, I, 39 and II, pl. 19.

³¹ Gardiner 1937, 100; Caminos 1954, 374.

More frequently, reading was for an audience. In the tale of the Eloquent Peasant (B1 78-80), the king, informed of the remarkable rhetorical skill of the peasant Khueninpw, asks that his words be put into writing, so that they can be listened to:³² “Then His Majesty said: As you desire to see me healthy, cause him to remain here, without replying to anything which he says. And so that he may keep on speaking, remain silent. Then let his words be brought to us in writing, that we may hear them (*ih in.tw n.n (mdw.f)*)³³ *m sš sdm.n st*”. The context makes it clear that the text was committed to papyrus so that others might hear it.

Listening played an important role in characterizing the wise man. He was the one who learned by listening. So it is recorded on the Stela of Intef from the beginning of the 12th Dynasty:³⁴ “I am a knower for him who lacks knowledge, who teaches a man what is useful to him (*ink rh n nty n rh.f sb3 s 3h.t(y).s(y) n.f*) (...) I am a listener who hears the truth and passes over what seems false (*ink sdm sdm m3't sw3w3 isst hr ib*)”.

At the conclusion of the Teachings of Amenemope there is praise for the positive effect of listening to the precepts elucidated in the text: “If they are read before an ignorant man, he will be purified (of his ignorance) through them” (*ir 'š st m b3h p3 hm hr-ir.f twr hr.sn*).³⁵

Moreover, it is important to remember that all wisdom texts were conceived as a speech pronounced by a moral authority to his own children or disciples.

The reception of a text through listening applied to letters, too. In the tale of Sinuhe, the protagonist listens to the contents of the letter sent by the pharaoh: “This decree reached me, while I was in the midst of my tribe. It was read to me, after I had prostrated myself and touched the ground (*šd.n.t(w).f n.i di.n.(i) wi hr ht.i dmi.n.i s3tw*)”.³⁶

Similarly in the tale of Wenamun, the letters which Wenamun gave to Smendes and Tentamun before undertaking his journey to Syria were read out loud: “On the day of my arrival at Tanis, the place where Smendes and Tentamun are, I gave them the letters of Amon-Re, king of gods. They had them read out before them (*iw.w dit 'š.tw.w m-b3h.w*)”.³⁷

In the Contendings of Horus and Seth as preserved in papyrus Chester Beatty I, the habits peculiar to the humankind are transferred to the divine sphere. The letter which the goddess Neith sent to the Ennead to persuade them to confer the office of Osiris on Horus, was read aloud by Thoth (*recto* 3,6): “The letter of Neith the Great, the divine mother, reached the Ennead as they sat in the hall ‘Horned-Horus’, and the letter was placed in the hand of Thoth. Then Thoth read it aloud before the All-Lord and the whole Ennead (*'h'.n Dhwty 'š.f m-b3h nb r-dr hn' t3 psdt r-dr.s*)”.³⁸

Is it conceivable that the reading of all kinds of texts was always and only aloud?

If we consider the words for “reading” and the references in the texts, we get the impression that this was indeed the most widespread and even the preferred method. Nevertheless, it does not seem possible to exclude the existence of any form of silent reading, even if limited to some specific situations.

In fact some sources hint at this practice, even if they are few and suggest that silent reading was sporadic.

In a very few cases the verb *m33*, literally “to see”, has the meaning “to read” and, by contrast to *šdi*, *'š* and *nis*, it implies sight alone.

³² Parkinson 1991, 20.

³³ *mdw.f* is only in R 124.

³⁴ Stela BM 581; Sethe 1928, 81; Lichtheim 1988, 110-111.

³⁵ Papyrus BM 10474, 27, 11-12; Laisney 2007, 228.

³⁶ Sinuhe B 200.

³⁷ Papyrus Moscow 1, 5; Lichtheim 1976, 224.

³⁸ Gardiner 1931, 16 and pl. 3.

The reading of letters in private could be silent, too. A text on the walls of the tomb of Senedjem-ib at Giza quotes the text of a letter which was sent by King Isesi: “My Majesty has read this your document that you have written, in order to cause that My Majesty know everything (...)” (*iw m3.n hm.(i) md3t.k tn irt.n.k r rdit rh hm.(i) ht nb(t) (...)*).³⁹

And again, from the letter that Isesi sent to Ra-shepses: “My Majesty has read this very beautiful writing (*iw m3.n hm.(i) ss pn nfr nfr*) that you made which was taken to the Palace in this beautiful day for the pleasure of Isesi, really, with what he loves truly. My Majesty loved to read this your writing more than everything (*mry hm.(i) m33 ss.k pn r ht nb*), because you can tell what My Majesty loves more than anything”.⁴⁰

In papyrus Anastasi I (4-7), a text from nearly a millennium later, the addressee of a letter — in this case, a simple scribe of the administration — affirms: “I rejoiced and I was glad, I made ready to reply. I entered into your (*sic*)⁴¹ stable to read your letter (*k.k(wi) r t3y.k smmt r m33 s't.k*). I found it consisted neither of praises nor of insults”.

Such silent reading is also known from administrative texts and from those associated with the bureaucracy.

Among the Duties of the Vizier cited in the tomb of Rekhmire, reading is an administrative act: “As for any writing sent [by the vizier to] any hall, being those which are not wrapped up (*i.e.* confidential), it shall be taken to him together with the documents of the keepers thereof under seal of the officers, and the scribes thereof after them; then he shall open it (*hr.f pg3.f sw*); then after he has read it (*hr ir m-ht m33.f sw*), it shall return to its place, sealed with the seal of the vizier”.⁴²

Royal decrees, too, inscribed in hieroglyphs on large stelae, are monumental testimony of a bureaucratic act and, as such, could be read silently. The Coptos Decrees — edicts enacted by the king for the benefit of the local priesthood — are an example.

In the decree Coptos B issued by Pepi II is written: “May the record about this decree, which is put on a stela of sandstone, be brought to the gate of the Min-Tempel in Coptos in the Two-Falcon nome, in order that the officers of this nome read (*r m33 imyw-st- nw sp3t tn*), that they must not take these priests to any work of the king’s palace in perpetuity”.⁴³

In the decree Coptos R, which goes back to a king of the 8th Dynasty, we read: “Make a copy of this decree. Cause that it is brought to any monarch of Upper Egypt and have it set on a stela of sandstone at the gate of every temple, in which are your monuments, in order that the sons of the sons of the people may read it [in perpetuity]”⁴⁴ (*r m33 s3w nw s3w nw rmtw [m 3wt dt]*).⁴⁵

Two passages from the stela of Neferhotep from Abydos document silent reading for the consultation of a text, too. In this inscription the king wishes to make an image for Osiris of Abydos, exactly as it was written in the holy books kept in the temple library. The text begins: “His Majesty said to the nobles (...) I wish to see (*i.e.* read) the primeval writings of Atum (*iw 3b.n ib.i m33 ssw p3t n 'Itm*). Unroll for me the Great Inventory. Let me know the god in his essence (*imi rh.(i) ntr m km3.f*) and the Ennead in its nature”.⁴⁶ The sense of the verb *m33*, is not simply that of seeing a book, which would not have much sense, but rather that of seeing a book in order to learn his content, in other words “to read” it.

³⁹ Sethe 1933, 60 (16-17).

⁴⁰ Sethe 1933, 179 (13-17).

⁴¹ Certainly a mistake for “my stable”.

⁴² Sethe – Helck 1984, 1110 (1-2).

⁴³ Goedicke 1967, 88 and fig. 8; Sethe 1933, 282 (12).

⁴⁴ For this reconstruction, see Goedicke 1967, 224 note 38.

⁴⁵ Sethe 1933, 306 (12); Goedicke 1967, 215 and fig. 28.

⁴⁶ Helck 1975, 21.

After the king consulted the writings, he gave the order to make the monument: “Then his Majesty said to these Companions: My Majesty will protect my father, Osiris-Foremost-of-the-Westerners, Lord of Abydos, that I may fashion him together with his Ennead, as my Majesty has read in his writings (*ms.i sw hn' psdt.f mi m3t.n hm.i m sšw.f*)”.⁴⁷ In this case the expression “as my Majesty has seen in his writings” must also mean “reading”.

Here the consultation of a text occurred silently, by contrast to the passage in the Teaching of Khety, where the verb *šdi* is used: “Read at the end of the Kemyt, where you find this sentence” (*šd ir.k m phwy Kmyt gmy.k ts pn im.s*).

Evidence for silent reading seems restricted to these examples, which show that it existed, although in limited form.

Administrative texts and letters could be read silently, while ritual, religious, and funerary texts needed the use of the voice.

It is very rare to find an appeal to the living, which invites those who pass by to read the formulae only with the eyes. One example is a funerary inscription from the Roman Period: “Oh you craftsmen of Thoth (...) he reads in this writing (*m33.f m sphrw ipw*), give your hearts to what is in it”.⁴⁸

In a stela from the Ptolemaic Period (Louvre C 232),⁴⁹ the act of reading aloud has two phases: reading with the eyes, followed by the pronunciation of the words: “Oh all you *wab*-priests, experienced in the god's words, who are learned in writing (...) praise (the god) for me, when you see the writings (*dw3 n.i ?⁵⁰ hft m33 sšw*)”.

To summarize:

The standard terms for reading (*šdi*, '*š*, *nīs*) prove that the act was conceived essentially as an experience involving the use of the vocal organ. However, the exceptional use of the verb *m33* “to see” with the meaning “to read” shows that a form of silent reading was known, although rare.

Certainly, reading aloud must not be considered a practice more archaic than reading silently, for in Late Egyptian, a new verb meaning “to read” — '*š*, which literally means “to call” — was introduced and used in texts beginning around the 13th century alongside the older *šdi*. Clearly the vocalic aspect of reading was maintained more than one and a half millennia after the invention of writing.

For any kind of text on any occasion, the more natural method was reading aloud.

The use of the voice was obligatory for ritual texts, at least when they were used during the actual performance of ritual. Such reading is essentially recitation, often accompanied by gestures. The main actor is the lector-priest (*hry-hb*) whose characteristic iconographical feature was a wide sash, draped over one shoulder diagonally across the chest. In the representations, he is portrayed reading from an open roll. The adjacent caption explains his action: *šdt sš* (reading the writing), *šdt s3hw* (reading the glorifications). Near him are individuals who accompany the reading with appropriate gestures.⁵¹ He was not the only person responsible for performing the (funerary or divine) ritual; the scribe of the divine scroll (*sš md3t ntr*) might assist him. In a text from the Ptolemaic Period about the holy feasts at Edfu it is asserted: “The offering-formulae are recited by the scribe of the divine scroll” (*'š n3 rw n w3h-ihf in p3 sš md3t ntr*).⁵²

Profane literature was also read in the same way. In many texts the explicit references to the performance of a text before an audience document that learning through listening played an important role in the second millennium, just as learning through reading.

⁴⁷ Helck 1975, 22.

⁴⁸ Stele Berlin 22489 (II century A.D.): Scharff 1927, 86-107 (particularly 104-105).

⁴⁹ *Wb. DZA* 23.666.800

⁵⁰ The person who autographed the text on the *Wb* slip was uncertain of this rendering.

⁵¹ Dominicus 1994, 83-88.

⁵² Rochemonteix-Chassinat 1892-1985, V, 131 (7).

The wisdom texts of all periods were conceived as speeches pronounced by a moral authority for the benefit of his children or disciples. The natural environment for such texts was the classroom, where the purpose was to inculcate a conscience in the leadership class. We cannot categorically exclude the possibility that the teacher or a high official “performed” the texts in order to recreate the contexts to which it referred.

Even individual reading was done with the help of the voice. Silent reading may have been more widespread than suggested by our sources which document the practice for personal letters, administrative documents, and the consultation of (temple) texts. A form of reading silently in private, which also must have existed, seems to have played a relatively marginal role. In relief and painting, the only persons depicted reading are priests performing the ritual and scribes carrying out administrative tasks. Although collections of manuscripts have been found which can be considered private libraries,⁵³ depictions of persons reading privately — that is, reading literary texts for themselves — are not documented. This shows only that a private use of literature was not considered relevant for the decoration of a tomb.

It should be mentioned, finally, that the introduction of “punctuation” dots in red ink during the Middle Kingdom was not for the logical articulations of the written text but intended rhetorically, to facilitate reading aloud and emphasis. During the Middle Kingdom, this practice is attested by at least four manuscripts:⁵⁴ the *verso* of papyrus Ramesseum II, where the dots are below the horizontal line of text, the *Ramesseum Wisdom Fragment*,⁵⁵ and two papyri now in University College,⁵⁶ with dots to the right of the vertical columns of text. In the New Kingdom, a greater number of manuscripts document this practice for a variety of genres. The dots were placed just above the horizontal lines of text. But since manuscripts with punctuation are relatively few — although their use is attested in Demotic texts⁵⁷ and even in Coptic⁵⁸ — it seems that the dots were not considered essential aids for reading.

⁵³ *E.g.*, Late Middle Kingdom manuscripts from a tomb in the Ramesseum precinct (“Ramesseum library”), and the set of manuscripts built up over more than a century by successive owners from Ramesseid Deir el-Medina. For private libraries, see: Parkinson 2002, 69-70.; Quirke 2004, 14-16; Morenz 1996, 142-158.

⁵⁴ Contardi 2003, 426-427.

⁵⁵ Parkinson 2002, 116.

⁵⁶ UCL 32106C (Parkinson 2002, 311) and 32110 G (Parkinson 2002, 117).

⁵⁷ In the Harper’s song: Thissen 1992.

⁵⁸ In the “Lied von Archellides”: see Till 1966, 302.

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